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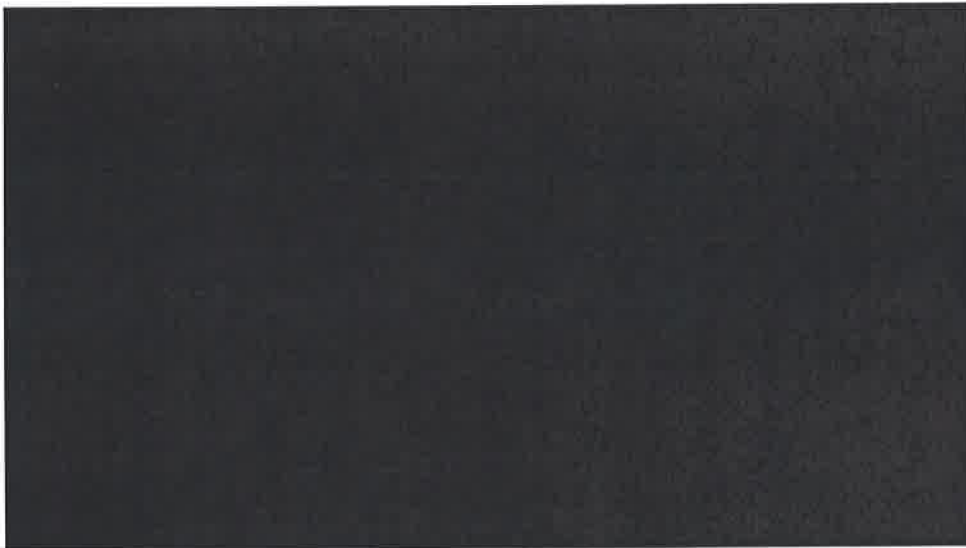
Stolen spaces: How handicap drivers are cheated in metro Detroit

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Stolen Spaces: Ever wonder why some drivers park in handicap spots when they're clearly not handicapped? Come along as Free Press reporters confront scofflaws who think it's their right to park wherever they please.

By Jennifer Dixon, Jim Schaefer and Kristi Tanner

Detroit Free Press Staff Writers

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On a busy Saturday at the Meijer in Westland, Michael Harris scopes the parking lot, looking for a space he can use.

"I'm not seeing anything," he said, exasperated.

Harris finally takes a spot far from the store and parks at an odd angle. He has learned that this is the only way to make sure he's not boxed in too tightly to get back in the car from his wheelchair.

"This is where the frustration sets in," said Harris, a 55-year-old ex-Marine who is paralyzed from the chest down.

Too often, he said, unthinking, uncaring and undeserving drivers illegally take a handicap spot, discouraging or preventing people with disabilities from

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Infographic: Handicap drivers cheated across Michigan



Photos by MANDI WRIGHT/Detroit Free Press

shopping or taking care of their everyday business.

• **Infographic:** Handicap drivers cheated across Michigan

It's a widespread problem affecting thousands of Michiganders – while others get away with breaking the law. A State of Michigan official even told her colleagues recently to use handicap spaces at their Lansing building when assigned spots were taken.

At a time when the number of handicap parking permits has exploded in Michigan, a Free Press examination found that enforcement of handicap parking laws is haphazard at best with little control or oversight by the Secretary of State's Office.

The examination included a review of more than 41,000 parking tickets from 21 law enforcement agencies or courts, in-person observation, interviews and a survey of 10 other states' handicap parking programs.

As it stands, the system in Michigan invites fraud and abuse. Other states are much more aggressive about protecting handicap parking spaces for the people who need them.

Harris of Westland, executive director of the 500-member Michigan Paralyzed Veterans of America, said that after health care, handicap parking "is our No. 1 issue, by far. We get so frustrated -- you can't do anything if you don't have the proper spots."

Parking, he said, "is a critical element of providing independence for our members."

More than that, parking is a safety issue. People in wheelchairs worry about being hit by drivers who cannot see them, a risk that rises the farther they must travel to enter a store.

The Free Press examination of records, tickets, regulations and actual spaces for handicap parking in Michigan found the problems facing disabled drivers are compounded in many ways:

- Able-bodied drivers freely take up spaces, many by using handicap placards or license plates that are not registered to them.
- Police in metro Detroit don't often ticket for such fraud, according to records produced by the communities surveyed. Some communities leave ticket-writing to civilians and volunteers, who generally are not permitted to access law enforcement data to check permit

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be drivers or passengers.

Once a health provider certifies the form, an employee in a Secretary of State branch approves it. Unlike other states, including Illinois and, soon, Florida, Michigan does not require people with permanent disabilities to periodically reapply for their permits and update their health information. New York City even has its own doctors to review applications.

A new Florida law also requires the state's Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles to conduct random reviews of handicap permit holders to ensure compliance and to remove people who have died from the permit list. The Florida Legislature also required the department to create a way for people to report parking permit abuse.

And in Maryland, handicap permit holders must always have their doctor's medical certification in their possession when using handicap parking, and must show it to police upon request.

Mark Cody, a lawyer for the Michigan Protection and Advocacy Service, said handicap parking placards are too easily altered.

"In this day and age, there ought to be technology to make a better product," he said.

Massachusetts, for example, issues laminated placards that include a photo of the permit holder.

A month after the Free Press asked Secretary of State officials about tampering issues, a spokesman said the department planned to start ordering placards with preprinted expiration dates.

Spokesman Fred Woodhams said the new system would "further secure the document" but insisted the department remains "confident in the placards in circulation."

Michigan also puts holds on motorists who have two or more unpaid handicap parking tickets, meaning they cannot renew their driver's licenses until they pay. But the state is notified only if two unpaid tickets were handled by the same court; there's generally no tracking multiple tickets in multiple cities.

A ticket for illegal parking in a handicap space carries a maximum penalty of \$250. Fraudulent use of a placard is a misdemeanor with a maximum penalty of \$500 and 30 days in jail.

Critics say those penalties aren't tough enough. The Illinois General Assembly this year made using a dead person's placard a misdemeanor punishable by loss of driver's license for a year and a \$2,500 fine.

In Michigan, state Rep. Jim Ananich, D-Flint, has introduced legislation that would double the maximum fine for parking without a placard to \$500. The minimum fine would also double, to \$200. Local communities set the fine.

Activists say other changes are needed and the state could start by

requiring plate and placard owners to periodically submit updated information about their disabilities. As it stands, once a doctor says someone is permanently disabled, that person never has to be checked again.

"There definitely should be a reapplication process," said Lisa Nygord, executive director of the Arc Dearborn, an organization for children and adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities. "That's the biggest concern."

Contact Jennifer Dixon: 313-223-4410 or jbdixon@freepress.com.
Contact Jim Schaefer: 313-223-4542 or jschaefer@freepress.com.

More Details: How to be heard

Contact state Rep. Jim Ananich, D-Flint, the sponsor of legislation to increase the fines for handicap parking violations, by e-mail at JimAnanich@house.mi.gov.

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